

Symposium: The Evolution of Data Needs for Policy/Research in Ireland
[Marking the Donation of Roy Geary's Papers to the UCD Geary Institute]

**Building a Data-Driven Public Service: Opportunities and Challenges for
Evidence-Informed Policymaking in Ireland**

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Abstract: The increasing complexity of modern policy challenges has intensified demands for evidence-informed decision-making across governments worldwide. Demographic change, technological transformation, economic uncertainty, climate pressures, and evolving citizen expectations require public institutions to become more agile, responsive, and data-driven. Ireland's policy regarding the use of data to drive better policy and services has evolved in this context. Current policy focuses on driving more strategic and coherent use of data to support the vision laid out in Better Public Services 2030 of 'inclusive, high quality and integrated Public Service provision that meets the needs and improves the lives of the people of Ireland'. The paper provides an assessment of Ireland's public data ecosystem, which attracts favourable international rankings on digital government, open data and trust. It lays out some of the current strengths in the system and remaining challenges to be addressed. A case study is included which illustrate strong examples of data use. Finally, it outlines priorities for a new Public Service Data Strategy and reflects on broader implications for public service transformation.

Keywords: public sector data, evidence-informed policy, public service transformation, public administration reform, public sector reform, data governance, public trust, digital government, public sector innovation, public governance, Ireland.

JELs: H83, H11

1. INTRODUCTION

Governments are operating in an increasingly complex environment characterized by rapid social, economic, technological, and environmental change. In this context, policymakers face interconnected challenges, including demographic trends, housing pressures, digital transformation, climate transition, geopolitical uncertainty, and shifting labour market demands. These challenges provide an impetus for change, both in the immediate and longer term. *Future Forty: An Economic and Fiscal Outlook to 2065* (Department of Finance, 2025), lays out the longer term view from an Irish perspective very well. In the short term, trade-offs and decisions are required to meet the needs and expectations of the public, within budgetary constraints and to ensure investment is delivering, and providing value for money. In these circumstances, effective governance requires an agile and responsive public service, with access to high-quality evidence capable of informing decisions throughout the policy cycle.

Data have become central to this endeavour. Evidence-informed policymaking has long been important to government and the civil service, as laid out in the other papers in this series, and as exemplified by Roy Geary's career and significant contribution. Now it has moved front and centre, beyond the remit of analysts and

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statisticians exclusively, to become a core component of public sector effectiveness. Increasingly, governments seek to leverage administrative data, statistical resources, digital records, and emerging analytical technologies to improve policy design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

In Ireland, this shift has been accompanied by a growing recognition that data should be viewed not simply as an operational resource, or the purview of specialists, but as a strategic asset, which public servants need to be adept at using in a wide range of roles. The advancement of digital public services has led to significant increases in data generation and availability. At the same time, public expectations regarding transparency, accountability, and service quality have intensified.

At the European level, the Draghi (2024) and Letta (2024) reports highlight the importance of utilising data and digital resources to drive European competitiveness. Simplification of European digital and data regulations is underway to enable this through the *Digital Omnibus Regulation Proposal* (European Commission, 2025) which is currently being negotiated.

This article explores how these developments are shaping Ireland's public service transformation agenda. It examines the current state of the national data ecosystem, identifies key strengths and challenges, and discusses how existing and emerging policy initiatives seek to strengthen the strategic use of data across government. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between data usage, institutional capability, and public trust.

2. PUBLIC SERVICE TRANSFORMATION AND THE IRISH CONTEXT

2.1 The Growing Importance of Data in Public Policymaking

The growing importance of data in policymaking aligns with broader transformations in the nature of public governance. Policy challenges are increasingly multidimensional and interconnected, requiring governments to draw upon diverse evidence sources in order to understand problems and develop appropriate interventions. Public organisations must work with each other across boundaries, which involves sharing data and insight.

Data supports policymaking in several ways. It enables governments to identify emerging trends, understand population needs, allocate resources more effectively, evaluate policy outcomes, and improve service delivery. Data also provides a foundation for accountability by allowing policymakers and the public to assess whether interventions are achieving intended results.

Importantly, the role of data extends beyond policy formulation. Increasing attention is now being paid to the relationship between policymaking and implementation. Policy is really only as good as its implementation, therefore policy development, implementation and service delivery must be closely intertwined and data are essential to drive better policy, services and outcomes, including assessing the impact of government programmes and interventions. There is growing interest in how data can be used throughout the entire policy cycle—from agenda-setting and design through implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. *The Policy Handbook* (Department of the Taoiseach, 2025) highlights data and evidence of one of three essential pillars of policy development alongside legitimacy and feasibility.

Digitalisation has accelerated these possibilities. As public services become increasingly digitised, public service bodies gain access to larger volumes of administrative information generated through routine service delivery. They also gain valuable insights from the behaviour and feedback of users of public services. This creates opportunities for more responsive and adaptive forms of governance. However, it also raises new questions regarding data management, governance, interoperability, and ethical use.

2.2 Better Public Services

Ireland's public service transformation agenda provides an important context for understanding current developments in data policy. Central government initiatives increasingly emphasise the need to equip public institutions with the capabilities required to respond to future challenges. Strategies for Civil and Public Service reform over the past decade, such as *Civil Service Renewal 2030* (Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, 2021), have placed an increasing focus on the importance of evidence-informed policy making, and the technical and specialist skills and infrastructures required to support this process.

Better Public Services 2030 (Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, 2023) is the Government's policy for public service transformation across the civil and public service. This lays out a shared public service vision to deliver inclusive, high quality and integrated public services that meet the needs and improve the lives of the people of Ireland.

Better Public Services provides the overarching strategic framework for bringing together key initiatives and infrastructure to drive transformation. With the leadership and sponsorship of the Public Service Leadership Board, it is being implemented through flagship programmes driven centrally, and transformation initiatives undertaken by all Public Service Bodies.

Progress on the key metrics associated with the Better Public Service priorities is tracked through specific output and outcome metrics including; customer satisfaction; use of digital public services; quality of public services; government effectiveness; employee engagement and public trust.

The strategy is framed around three interconnected pillars and priorities:

- ***Digital and Innovation at Scale***

Digitalisation represents a major pillar of transformation. Public services are increasingly adopting digital technologies to improve efficiency, accessibility, and responsiveness. While digitalisation generates operational benefits, it also dramatically increases the volume of information available to government. The challenge is therefore not merely one of collecting data but of organising, managing, and utilising those data effectively. Without appropriate governance structures and analytical capacity, the potential value of digital transformation may remain unrealised. The *Digital Public Services Plan 2030* (Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, 2025), lays out how Ireland will take a human centred approach to reach the EU Digital Decade targets of 100% of key public services online by 2030, and 90% of these services consumed online, allowing for in person service delivery options to be accessed where preferred.

- ***Workforce and Organisation of the Future***

The second priority concerns the future public service workforce. While investments in technology are important, the effective use of data ultimately depends upon people. Governments require staff capable of understanding and interpreting data, and utilising evidence to generate insight and inform decision making. This requires both specialist analytical roles and broader data literacy among generalist policymakers. As data become increasingly embedded within policy and service processes, workforce capability becomes a critical determinant of success. Increasing public service capacity for an evidence-informed approach to policymaking is therefore a priority to strengthen good public governance (OECD, 2020)

- ***Evidence-Informed Policy and Services Designed for and with our Public***

Evidence remains a central pillar and focus of public sector reform. Evidence-informed policy-making is the process of using the best available evidence to inform and guide the development, implementation, and evaluation of public policies. The goal of EIPM is to ensure that policy decisions are grounded in reliable, objective, and up-to-date evidence, rather than being based solely on opinions, ideologies, or political pressures (European Commission Joint Research Centre, 2025).

Better Public Services 2030 (Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, 2023) lays out how effective human centred policies must be developed based on enhanced data, analytics and insight, and designed and delivered with the customer at the centre. Accessible and shared public service data should be available and should support evidence informed policy and services.

3. TRUST AS A FOUNDATION OF PUBLIC SERVICE TRANSFORMATION

Public trust is essential for the support and successful delivery of government programmes, and it underpins good public governance. It is one of the outcomes we are monitoring and seeking to strengthen through the implementation of *Better Public Services 2030*.

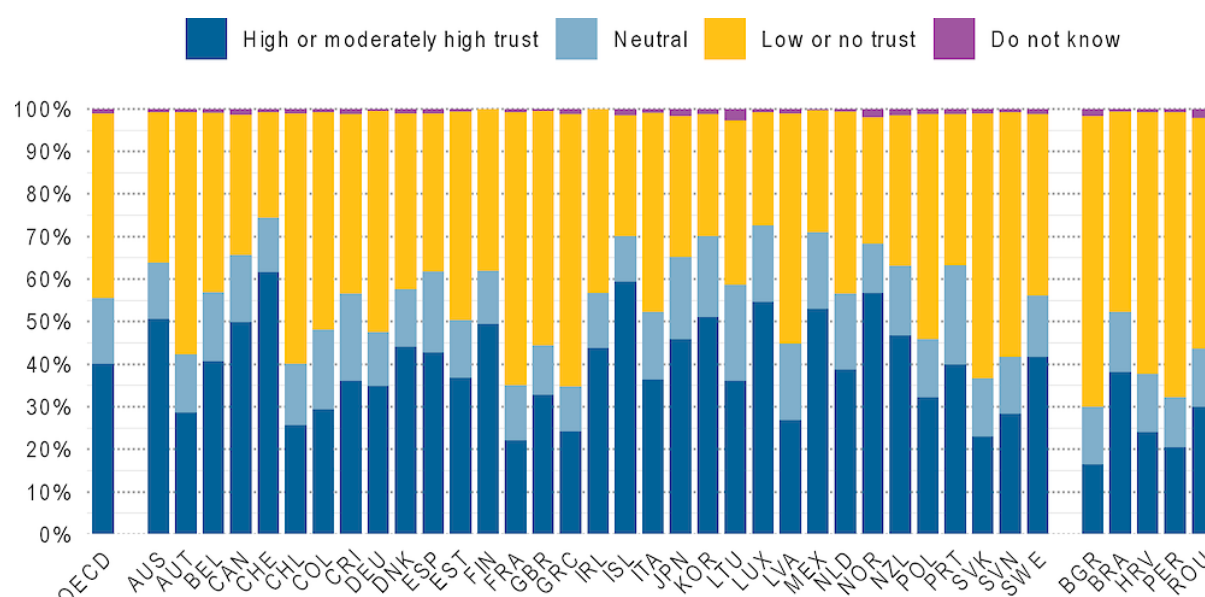
3.1 Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions

The OECD measures public trust every two years through their survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions. Ireland has participated in all three iterations of the survey to date and this provides an important international benchmark of national performance on trust in public institutions, including national government, the civil service, local government, legislatures, police and courts. The survey was administered by the CSO in Ireland in autumn 2025, with a representative sample of 6,000 and 2,194 responses, giving a response rate of 37% (CSO, 2026).

The 2025 survey covers 33 OECD countries and 5 accession countries drawing on responses from more than 76,000 people. Figure 1 shows that 43% of people across OECD countries have low or no trust in the national government, compared with 40% with high or moderately high trust. As per previous survey waves, there are significant variations across countries and population groups. While there was a small decrease in trust in 2023

compared to 2021, trust levels have since stabilised, and substantially improved in about half of the countries where it had previously declined (OECD, 2024, 2026). In Ireland 44% of those surveyed reported high or moderately high trust in national government.

Figure 1: OECD Trust Survey Results 2025 – Trust in National Government



Trust in government therefore remains a significant challenge internationally. Even where trust levels compare favourably with international averages, substantial proportions of the public remain sceptical of government institutions.

The OECD's work provides important analysis and understanding of the factors that influence trust, as well as recommendations on what governments can do to build public trust. Previous iterations of the trust survey have reported that key drivers of trust in government include; perceptions of having a say in government decisions; satisfaction with day to day interactions with administrative and public services; perceptions regarding how government deals with complex policy issues; and perceptions of evidence informed policy making. The 2025 survey results confirm previous trends and provide additional insight.

With regard to public services, OECD analysis shows that trust is built through responsiveness, reliability, integrity, openness, fairness. Actions that governments can take to strengthen trust include; citizen engagement; strengthened ability to address complex policy challenges; a healthy information ecosystem and evidence-informed communication; and investment in reliable, responsive and fair public services.

OECD findings show that people who believe that governments make decisions based on the best available evidence, are open to input from the public and stakeholders, and balance the needs of current and future generations, that are more likely to have high or moderately high trust in the national government (OECD, 2024, 2026).

3.2 Trust, evidence and data

The effective use of data ultimately depends upon public trust. In the context of data-driven government, trust becomes especially important because many public sector activities depend upon the collection, use, and sharing of personal and administrative information.

Importantly, perceptions regarding evidence-informed decision-making are closely linked to trust. The public are more likely to trust governments when they believe policy decisions are informed by objective evidence rather than arbitrary or purely political considerations. The OECD recommends that governments should invest more in the engagement of people and stakeholders, transparency, evidence, and communication for decision-making, and in ensuring the fairness of decisions (OECD, 2024, 2026).

Irish results show a decline from 69% to 66% from 2023 to 2025 in those who trust that government will use personal data legitimately. This is still favourable compared to OECD average which found that in 2025, 52% of

people found it likely that government agencies use personal data only for legitimate purposes. Irish results also show a slight decline in those who believe that national government uses evidence in decision making from 41% to 39%. Here the Irish result is slightly below the OECD average, where 42% believe that national government uses evidence in decision making.

New data were collected through the 2025 survey on perceptions of the use of artificial intelligence by governments. Globally, only around four in ten people are confident that government use of AI could lead to more tailored public services and reduce costs, with rates higher among respondents familiar with AI. Confidence is even lower, when it comes to whether AI is used with transparency, fairness and the protection of personal information (OECD, 2026). In Ireland, 33% were confident, while half of respondents (50%) were not confident in the government's future use of AI in providing services that are better tailored to individual needs. Only 15% were confident with government agencies future use of AI and their ability to protect individuals' personal information from unauthorised access or misuse, while 72% of respondents were not confident (CSO, 2026). The CSO provides additional analysis and infographics to illustrate the results of the survey, such as that in Figure 2 below, which illustrates levels of trust in a range of public institutions.

The relationship between data, evidence and trust creates both an opportunity and a responsibility. Effective use of evidence can strengthen institutional legitimacy, but failures in data governance can quickly erode public confidence. Accordingly, transparency, accountability, and ethical stewardship must remain central components of any public service data strategy.

Figure 2: CSO Infographic illustrating trust in a range of public institutions – based on OECD Trust Survey Results 2025



4. IRELAND'S CURRENT DATA ECOSYSTEM

4.1 Overview

Overall, Ireland already has a strong foundation in data governance and enjoys a relatively high level of public trust in how data is used across public services. Beyond the findings of the OECD trust survey outlined above, Ireland performs well on metrics of digital and data governance internationally. Ireland ranked 7th out of 36 countries in the 2025 *Digital Government Index* (OECD, 2025), which measures how well countries are transforming public services using digital technology. Ireland ranked 5th overall out of 36 countries in the EU's 2025 *Open Data Maturity Assessment* (European Commission, 2025) which evaluates the progress of European countries in making public sector information available and promoting its reuse. Ireland was fourth among EU Member States in this survey, with an overall score of 96%.

Digital tools, better use of data, and modern IT systems help create more efficient public services, fairer and more transparent decision-making, greater public trust, and a stronger, more innovative economy. The Government’s updated National Digital & AI Strategy, Digital Ireland – Connecting our People, Securing our Future (Government of Ireland, 2026), sets out the Government’s ambition and vision to 2030 to ensure Ireland remains a digital leader in an increasingly competitive global environment. Advancing digital government and maximising the use of data to enhance policy and public services are also central pillars of transformation under Better Public Services 2030.

Actions under The Public Service Data Strategy 2019–2023 (Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, 2019) delivered significant progress in how public sector data is governed, shared, and used, laying the foundations for a more integrated and evidence-driven system. A key achievement was the introduction of the Data Sharing and Governance Act 2019 (Government of Ireland 2019), which provided a clear legal basis for data sharing, alongside strengthened governance structures that improved accountability and coordination. The Open Data Strategy 2023-2027 (Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, 2023) and the Public Service Data Strategy 2019-2023 (Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, 2019) also advanced Ireland’s Open Data agenda, with continued expansion of the Open Data Portal² and greater availability of high-value datasets, now standing at 22,000 in 2026. Despite ongoing challenges, Ireland has developed a substantial and increasingly sophisticated data ecosystem.

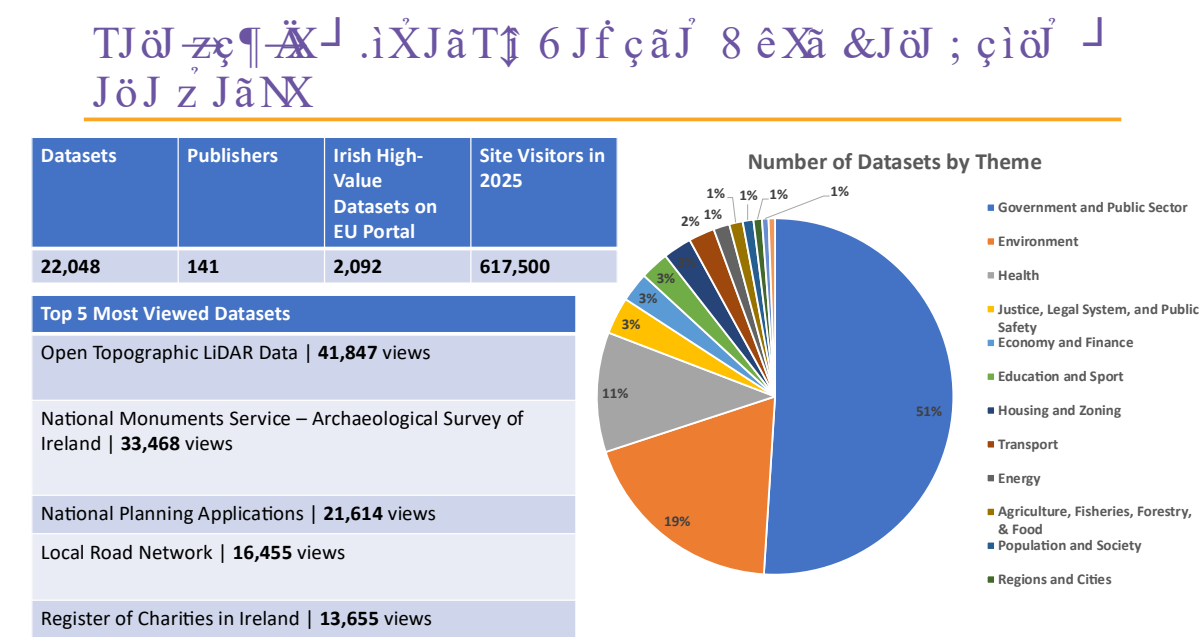
Case Study: Access to Data

Data.gov.ie is Ireland’s national open data portal – hosting over twenty-two-thousand datasets from one-hundred-and-forty-one publishers across the public sector in Ireland. Spanning a wide variety of themes, data is made available by public service bodies to enhance transparency, support evidence-informed policymaking, and enable innovative re-use cases that unlock economic and social value at scale. Figure 3 below provides an overview of the volume and type of datasets available on Data.gov.ie.

The portal is linked with data.europa.eu – the European open data portal – allowing for seamless interoperability. At the EU level, there is a strong focus on High-Value Datasets in line with the Implementing Regulation on High Value Datasets (European Commission, 2023) under the Open Data Directive (European Commission, 2019). These are key datasets identified for their potential to deliver significant economic, social, and environmental benefit. These High-Value Datasets are provided in machine-readable formats, and where possible via APIs, enabling maximum re-use potential across government, research, and enterprise contexts.

Open data plays a crucial role in driving whole-of-government transformation and digital service delivery, in line with the Better Public Services 2030 Strategy, and is a key enabler of emerging technologies, like AI.

Figure 3: An overview of the data published on Ireland’s National Open Data Portal



² National Open Data Portal <https://data.gov.ie/>

4.2 Strengths within the Data Ecosystem

Growth of Analytical Capacity

An important strength is the expansion of analytical expertise within government itself. Following reforms introduced after the global financial crisis, Ireland invested significantly in strengthening internal analytical capacity, in particular through the development of the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) by DPER. The development of the National Statistical Service (NSS) by the CSO has been complementary, and we now see public service bodies, particularly within the civil service, increasingly linking these functions internally to establish core functions around data and analysis, such as teams focused on data and/or research. The analysts are also networked across Government Departments providing an important model of cross-sectoral expertise. Doyle, J. and Riordan, D. (2026) and Moloney, D., Dwyer, R., Glavey, S. and Sellars, D. (2024) tell the story of the development and contribution of these networks in the wider context of public service reform and evidence informed policy.

The presence of dedicated analytical personnel represents a significant institutional development. Rather than relying exclusively on external expertise, government departments now possess greater internal capacity to interrogate data, assess evidence, and contribute to policy design. The investment and increase in capacity regarding individuals, networks and functions focused on data and analysis has also driven increased demand for data within the system. These analysts play an increasingly important role in supporting evidence-informed decision-making and policy evaluation. The more recent establishment of the National Data Analytics Network by CSO holds promise to contribute strongly to this agenda. These developments represent strong progress, in skills development and capacity building.

Research and Policy Collaboration

Collaboration between policymakers and the higher education and research sector is a growing strength as well. The importance of evidence informed policy is embedded in Irish research and innovation strategies, and the programmes of key public service bodies such as Research Ireland. The Department of Further and Higher Education Research, Innovation and Science have a pivotal role to play in driving synergies between policy makers and researchers.

Universities and research institutes play a crucial role in generating knowledge, developing analytical methodologies, and training future data professionals. Collaborations between government, academia, and research centres contribute significantly to the national evidence infrastructure. These partnerships facilitate innovation while creating opportunities to address complex policy challenges through multidisciplinary approaches.

Advances in Data Infrastructure

Ireland has also made progress in developing technical infrastructure that supports secure data access and analysis with a number of organisations across the public service, including the CSO, playing crucial roles. Initiatives enabling the secure linking and analysis of datasets across organisational boundaries have expanded opportunities for policy-relevant research. Such developments facilitate deeper understanding of complex societal problems by allowing data from multiple sources to be combined and analysed in protected environments. Consistent use of key national identifiers, in particular the PPSN, UBI and Eircode underpins a shared approach to linking data. Data sharing agreements and strong data governance in line with the Data Sharing and Governance Act 2019 (Government of Ireland, 2019) have underpinned a robust approach to data sharing, in line with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (European Commission, 2016).

Specialised centres focusing on advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, and high end computing have also strengthened national capabilities and enhanced opportunities for innovation. The CSO has developed a model of Virtual Data Rooms to meet the growing need for advanced data analytics capabilities across public service. The VDR collaborative service, is built on a secure analytics platform with standardised visualisation tools and robust governance processes that enable cross-agency data analysis in a controlled and compliant environment. It enables public service bodies to conduct analysis that supports evidence-informed decision making, necessary for public policy evaluation and formulation.

Culture and Strategy

With greater analytical capacity in place in many public service bodies, a more open and strategic approach to data is growing. The national open data portal has expanded to host more than 20,000 datasets published by almost 150 publishers, in line with the National Open Data Strategy 2023-2027 (Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, 2023) and the EU Open Data Directive (European Commission, 2019).

Several organisations have published dedicated data strategies. In addition, joined up approaches are being advanced through for example the CSO's Data Strategy (CSO, 2026) and the National Equality Data Strategy (Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 2026) which illustrate the development of a cross-cutting approach to standards and use that is also indicative of a maturing system.

4.3 Persistent Challenges in Achieving Data-Driven Government

There are strong foundations to build on. However, challenges persist and barriers remain to the realisation of a fully integrated data-driven public service. Through policy analysis and development associated with a forthcoming Public Service Data Strategy some consistent areas in need of attention have emerged. These will now need to be addressed in order to advance the maturity of the data ecosystem, and deliver an integrated, data-driven public service, where high-quality data routinely informs policy, service planning and delivery to achieve better public services outcomes for all. Achieving this vision is the next stage in Ireland's public service data journey.

Discoverability and Accessibility

Despite the existence of several central data resources, potential users do not always know where to find the data they need. There have been investments in catalogues, repositories, central portals and discovery tools, such as the National Open Data Portal, and the Public Service Data Catalogue³ but difficulties in locating relevant datasets remain. Addressing this issue requires not only better technical solutions but also greater coordination and communication across organisations.

Fragmented Data Sharing

One of the most significant challenges concerns data sharing between public bodies. Although there has been progress, particularly in line with the Data Sharing and Governance Act, data sharing practices remain inconsistent and often fragmented. Public service bodies frequently operate according to different standards, procedures, and governance frameworks. As a result, opportunities for data integration are not always fully realised. This fragmentation limits the ability of policymakers to develop comprehensive understandings of policy problems that span organisational or sectoral boundaries.

Data Quality and Standardisation

Data quality remains another significant concern. Before data can be shared or analysed, they often require extensive cleaning, preparation, and standardisation. Enormous effort goes into these processes, and the ability of public service bodies to carry out this work varies greatly. Inconsistent formats, differing definitions, and varying collection practices create barriers to interoperability. Some organisations may hesitate to share data because of concerns regarding quality or completeness. Such perceptions can create behavioural barriers that limit collaboration and reduce the overall effectiveness of the data ecosystem.

Governance Complexity

Data protection regulations play an essential role in safeguarding citizens' rights and maintaining public trust. However, their implementation has sometimes created uncertainty within public organisations, regarding practices to do with differentiating and handling personal data. In some cases, public service employees remain unsure about what forms of data sharing are legally permissible. This uncertainty may discourage potentially beneficial uses of data, even where appropriate legal mechanisms exist. There is a need to retain protections while improving clarity, guidance, and confidence regarding lawful and responsible data use.

Continuing Skills Gaps

Although specialist capacity has expanded, disparities remain in data literacy among generalist policymakers. Many public service employees are expected to engage with data and evidence without necessarily possessing advanced analytical training. Consequently, there is an ongoing need to strengthen data skills among generalists and in addition to growing technical expertise.

4.4 Towards a New Public Service Data Strategy

Recognising both achievements and ongoing challenges, Ireland is developing a new Public Service Data Strategy to strengthen data sharing and use across government and advance data maturity of our data ecosystem. The strategy is still under development, however there are a number of areas of focus. In line with international best practice, EU and national policy, a clear vision is emerging of an integrated, data-driven public service, where high-quality data routinely informs policy, service planning and delivery to achieve better public services

³Public Service Data Catalogue <https://datacatalogue.gov.ie/>

outcomes for all. This is a significant culture shift from data ownership to stewardship. This will be underpinned by commitments to transparent, ethical and responsible practices, value for money and a focus on outcomes.

Improving Data Access and Integration

There will need to be a focus on improving the collection, linking, and accessibility of data. This will involve reducing fragmentation and simplifying data access for public servants, to drive better policy, services and outcomes. Policymakers, analysts, researchers, and service providers require mechanisms that allow them to find, use and share relevant information while maintaining appropriate safeguards. We need to do more to reduce the barriers to data sharing between public service bodies.

Creating Public Value

To create additional public value from data, we need to have the people, skills and insights in place to achieve better outcomes. We need to have access to the data to measure and monitor these outcomes. This will require translation of data into insight and the use of this insight. It will require collaboration between governments, researchers, businesses, civil society organisations, and citizens. Value creation will lead to better policy and services, enabling innovation and broader economic and social benefits. This is in line with EU policy and the vision described by the Draghi and Letta reports.

Maintaining Trust

As we develop our data ecosystem we must continue to build on and develop our strong foundations of public trust. This is particularly important in the context of emerging technologies such as AI. As governments expand their use of data and advanced technologies, trust must remain a guiding principle. Citizens must have confidence that their information is being managed responsibly, securely, and ethically. This will require a strong focus on security, privacy, data protection and ethical use. Governance frameworks, accountability mechanisms, and public engagement processes are likely to remain central features of future developments.

Our public service data ecosystem will continue to develop. Within that context, public service bodies are at different stages of development and maturity. A core objective is to enable data leaders, while also supporting those who are at earlier stages of their journey, and to connect public service bodies to enable sharing and learning throughout the system. The Public Service Data Strategy will provide a collection of measures to enhance what is working well, as well as measures to address challenges and remove barriers, and to provide a joined up and strategic way forward.

5. EMERGING DIRECTIONS: NEW FORMS OF EVIDENCE AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

The environment continues to change rapidly with increasing focus on the intertwined drivers of transformation provided by digitalisation, increased volumes and types of data, and the rise of artificial intelligence. The future of evidence-informed policymaking is likely to involve increasingly diverse forms of data. Traditionally, policy analysis relied heavily on quantitative indicators and official statistics. While these remain essential, policymakers are increasingly recognising the value of qualitative information derived from service users, frontline staff, and community engagement processes. Insights from a range of data sources can be helpful in gaining a deeper understanding of policy and service challenges, and the feasibility of solutions, and interventions.

Developments in artificial intelligence offer new opportunities for analysing large and complex datasets. AI technologies may support pattern recognition, forecasting, service optimisation, and evidence synthesis. However, these possibilities also raise important and uncertain questions concerning accountability, transparency, bias, and governance. The successful integration of AI to enable public service processes and drive better outcomes and public value will therefore require both technical innovation and robust institutional safeguards.

The Guidelines for the Responsible Use of AI in the Public Service (Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, 2024), lay out an approach to responsible adoption in line with the EU AI Act (European Commission, 2024), but this is a rapidly evolving space. We see in the recent OECD Trust survey that citizens globally and in Ireland are unsure whether their governments are equipped to deal with AI responsibly (OECD, 2026). Governments will need to address these concerns while keeping up with the complex policy and programme development needed to harness the benefits of AI.

Promising practices and strengths continue to emerge across the public service, lending an optimism to the future. Skilled public servants are developing data driven analytical approaches, through networks such as IGEES, and the NSS, in a wider context of improved policy development through initiatives such as the Policy Handbook, which recognises data and evidence as one of the fundamental pillars of good policy development. A human centred approach to service design and delivery is embedded in the Digital Public Services Plan, with supports

and resources in place, through the delivery of the Design Action Plan (Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, 2026) and implementation of the Design for Public Value guidelines (Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, 2026). Data visualisation and dashboarding tools are becoming increasingly available and used, providing important insight to decision makers across the public service. Monitoring, evaluation and learning systems are becoming stronger supported by shared outcome frameworks such as the wellbeing framework (Department of the Taoiseach, 2023), and performance budgeting with its focus on overarching social outcomes – equality, sustainable development, environment impact.

6. CONCLUSION

The pursuit of data-driven government is a significant priority for public service transformation. In Ireland, progress has been made in developing analytical capacity, strengthening research partnerships, expanding digital infrastructure, and promoting evidence-informed policymaking. This is reflected in strong international rankings and public perceptions regarding digital government, open data and trust.

Nevertheless, important challenges remain to be addressed. Fragmented data-sharing arrangements, governance uncertainties, data quality issues, discoverability problems, and uneven skills development continue to constrain the full realisation of a mature data ecosystem.

At the heart of these challenges lies a broader issue: public trust. The legitimacy of data-driven governance depends not only upon technical capability but also upon public confidence that data are being used responsibly, transparently, and in the public interest. The Irish public expects government to use data effectively to drive better public services, while maintaining high standards of privacy, security and responsible use.

The next stage of development for our data ecosystem will be laid out in a new Public Service Data Strategy. The development of this strategy provides an opportunity to build on strengths, and address issues through a coordinated, system-wide approach. By improving data access, creating greater public value, and maintaining trust, Ireland can strengthen its capacity to respond to increasingly complex policy challenges.

Ultimately, the goal is not simply to collect more data but to create a public service in which data and evidence are routinely integrated into decision-making, service delivery, and evaluation. Achieving this vision will require sustained focus on strengthening our infrastructure, capability, governance, and collaboration. If successful, it offers the prospect of a more effective, responsive, and trusted system of public administration and public service delivery, which will help meet the needs and improve the lives of the people of Ireland.

[AI Acknowledgment: As an illustration of how public servants are adopting artificial intelligence to support their work, Microsoft Copilot was used in preparing this paper, in line with the Guidelines for the Responsible Use of AI in the Public Service (Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, 2024), as a writing assistant in the summarising and editing of text. It was not used to generate substantive content or to shape the analysis. All substantive analysis, interpretation, framing and conclusions are those of the authors.]

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DISCUSSION

Feargal O Brolchain: I would like to thank all contributors for their presentations which I found interesting, informative and entertaining. I think it is clear from what we have heard this evening that Roy Geary should be recognised as one of the architects of modern Ireland and be included in any future lists of such persons.

John O'Hagan: These talks bring me back to a book I once reviewed by Philipp Lepenies titled *The Power of a Single Number: A Political History of GDP*, published by Columbia University Press in 2016. Interestingly, for an Irish audience, he traces the origins of national statistics to William Petty, whose mapping/data skills were used by Cromwell to determine how land and estates in Ireland were to be distributed among the 'colonisers', which by coincidence resulted in a very sizeable allocation to his own family! Much of Petty's data collection work, in fact, he argues was politically motivated. So my question is then: To what extent might this be the case regarding national statistics in some countries today, including the US?